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RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

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The Royal Court of Scotland 1579-1585

Sarah Carpenter

The Royal Court of Scotland

The Royal Court was a central patron of theatrical and quasi-theatrical activity in Scotland, especially during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ Both separate from, and yet often engaging with the dramatic forms flourishing elsewhere in the land, court culture supported at various times during this period a wide range of performance modes including music and dance, foolery, debate and flyting, religious, seasonal and political ceremonial, and quasi-theatrical games of masking, guising and tournament as well as scripted plays. Scotland offers a model of a fully developed, internationally active, but relatively small-scale royal court. While sharing in the language of magnificence and display that characterised courtly performance in Europe, Scotland's limited size and wealth led to a less elaborate theatrical culture than is apparent in neighbouring nations. It thus provides a manageable field to explore an independent national practice which also participated in the international courtly culture of Europe.

Royal court culture in Scotland was both intermittent and somewhat peripatetic. Of the eight monarchs who reigned through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, six acceded to the throne as children or infants, and for 87 of the 200 years in question the monarch was either under the age of fifteen, absent from Scotland, or both.² During these years a culture of theatrical performance at court was inevitably diminished if not wholly in abeyance, regenerating during the personal reigns of adult monarchs. The geographical centre of the court was also variable. Edinburgh only became the national capital and centre of

government in the mid-fifteenth century, and even after that time Scottish monarchs continued to move between a variety of residences, in Stirling (where the Chapel Royal was based), Falkland and elsewhere, as well as the capital. The court appears to have engaged with local performers and traditions in its different residences as well as maintaining its own performance activities.

Based as it was in a centre of power, dramatic activity at court inevitably carried more than simply an entertainment role. Through patronage and display, through its elite, interconnected and influential audiences, performance always played into the political and social functions of the Scottish royal court. It carried an active role in the relationship of the monarch to both court and country, a role that might be more or less deliberately shaped. At times the records can reveal not only the nature and material substance of theatrical activity, but how subtly and yet vividly performance at the centre of power might engage with contemporary political issues.³

The surviving record evidence is varied and complex in nature and extent. Exchequer records provide evidence of expenditure, in particular the series of Treasurer's Accounts which runs almost uninterrupted, although of variable thoroughness, from 1473 to 1635. This can occasionally be supplemented from such sources as the more partial runs of Household Books, Exchequer Rolls, Master of Works accounts or Wardrobe Inventories. The activities recorded in this expenditure can often be illuminated by contemporary reports contained in state papers and correspondence, especially that with England whose envoys were concerned to advise on developments in the Scottish court.⁴ Further eyewitness or reported descriptions of court performance can also be found in the contemporary memoirs and histories of Scotland which flourished during the period, and in such records as the *Diurnal of Remarkable Occurrents* (1513-75).⁵ Many of these sources have been printed at one time or another, in more or less extensive extracts or calendars, but most of these publications were initiated well over a century ago and even the most extensive are selective, silently omitting material deemed at the time repetitive or uninformative. Since they do not identify performance as a specific object of interest, references are often hard to locate and evaluate. The seminal work in the area, Anna J Mill's *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (1927), while remaining an invaluable survey and record selection, has been out of print for many years, its selections relying on a narrower definition of performance that excludes some important areas of record material.⁶ The RED:S volume on The Royal Court should eventually draw together all existing evidence from these many sources for courtly performance in Scotland before the mid-seventeenth century.

The Treasurer's Accounts 1579-85

Historical background

The set of records published here is drawn from one source, the royal Treasurer's Accounts, which recorded the expenditure on the royal household, including such areas as wardrobe, liveries, stables, castles and palaces, and alms. The accounts from 1473 to 1579/80 have been published in relatively complete form in the series *Compota Thesaurariorum regum Scotorum*, or *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, comprising thirteen volumes released between 1877 and 1978.⁷ The records presented here are drawn from five sets of Treasurer's Accounts which cover a period from the year 1579 to 1585. These were the first few years of James VI's personal reign, from the point where he actively took on direct rule from the fourth and final Regent of his minority, James Douglas, fourth Earl of Morton, at the age of thirteen. This is a significant period for theatrical activity at the Royal Court for a number of reasons. During James's minority, since being crowned as an infant in 1567, he had been brought up under the strict Protestant mentorship of his tutor, the Latin scholar George Buchanan, protected in the castle of Stirling.⁸ Under a succession of Regents, and in the fraught aftermath of Mary Queen of Scots' forced abdication and imprisonment in England, there is unsurprisingly little record of any culture of performance at this time at the Scottish court. But in 1578, following increasing friction between Morton and other political factions, James was declared to be of age to assume personal rule. In late September 1579 he finally left Stirling, travelling to Edinburgh to take up residence in Holyrood Palace, and made a spectacular formal royal entry to the city on 17 October 1579. This public assumption of personal rule effectively coincided with the arrival from France early in September of his 37-year old cousin Esmé Stewart, Sieur d'Aubigny, who very quickly won James's affection, becoming a favourite of the young king and being rapidly advanced to the status of Earl, later Duke, of Lennox and to a position of authority over the royal household. D'Aubigny introduced James to the flamboyant courtly culture of France, and his influence can be seen in the evidence of performance activity that begins to show in the records.

Although, with strong encouragement from James, the new Earl of Lennox converted from Roman Catholicism, he remained an object of suspicion both to the Presbyterian Kirk and to many of the Scots nobles who objected to his increasing power and influence over the king. In August 1582, in the 'Ruthven Raid', James was abducted by a group of nobles who came to be known as the Lords Enterprisers, led by William, Lord Ruthven, Earl of Gowrie, and detained in Perth, Stirling and elsewhere, for almost a year. During that time James was either persuaded, or compelled to accept the exile of Esmé Stewart who was forced to return to France where he died in May 1583. From the time of the Ruthven Raid, records of theatrical events are significantly diminished in these sets of the Treasurer's Accounts. While evidence of certain kinds of courtly play and music remains, there is little sign that James immediately reverted to a culture of dramatic activity at court on his escape from the

Gowrie regime in July 1583. The set of records published here thus revealingly charts the role played by performance activity across the crucial early years of James VI's personal rule.

Performance and play at the court of James VI

While a range of dramatic and quasi-dramatic activities are evident at the new court of the young James VI, the Treasurer's Accounts provide no evidence that this included formal scripted plays.⁹ James's public assumption of rule began with a royal entry into his capital city, where he was welcomed by the traditionally spectacular and advisory pageants and elaborate ceremonial of such occasions; but this was financed by the burgh rather than the royal household, and has left scarcely any trace in the Treasurer's Accounts themselves.¹⁰ At court, however, we almost immediately find evidence of developed masque events, probably influenced from France, some apparently performed by professionals and some in which James himself took part. In December 1579, masking costumes and weapons were provided for James's 'violaris', for what seems almost certain to be the performance of a mumming-and-combat masque composed by Alexander Montgomerie; unusually, the script for this masque survives.¹¹ Montgomerie, who became an admired poet in James's court over the next few years, had recently returned to Scotland from Europe (possibly in the entourage of Esmé Stewart), and wrote the *The Navigatioun* and *A Cartell of the thre Ventrous Knichts* to celebrate the young king as 'the bravest burgeoun [= bud] brekking to the Rose'.¹² The masking gear recorded in the Accounts matches well to the scenario envisaged in this script. In February 1582 the same performers are again provided with 'necessarie apparrell and wappinnis to a mask dans', while in January 1581 there is record of masking clothes for James himself, for the spectacular wedding of the young Earl of Murray. During this period the king was also learning to dance, with payments to a dancing master. It is noticeable that after August 1582, the time of the Ruthven Raid, there is no more expenditure on this kind of activity during this period.

The most regular payments for performance, ongoing before and after this set of accounts, are to James's permanent musicians. Often referred to as the 'Inglis violaris' these were a group of brothers from an English family of the name Hudson who are first recorded at court at the time of the wedding of James's parents in 1565.¹³ Thomas and Robert Hudson were also poets, William is referred to as the king's 'balladin' or dancing master, while James became a trusted envoy between Edinburgh and London. Most of the payments to the Hudsons are generic, for livery clothes or ongoing wages, but their regularity and comparative generosity, along with various more specific rewards, confirm the ongoing importance of the group in both the cultural and political life of the court. However, although James VI also commissioned a pair of virginals to be brought from London at significant expense, there is little impression, certainly from the Treasurer's Accounts, that he took significant personal interest in music (in a report in 1584 the French ambassador wrote that he 'hates dancing and music in general').¹⁴ There is, however, some ongoing record evidence of musical culture at his court, and payments are occasionally made to

visiting musicians, sometimes established figures from overseas. James's court was clearly open to international networks that contributed to its own performance culture: French musicians such as Jean Servin and Guillaume Tressier, the Hudson violers from England, the Irish poet Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird and the wealthy and cultured Esmé Stewart, all testify to the cosmopolitan influences on court performance. More provincially, James regularly gave small rewards to local swashers, pipers and highland musicians when on progress or visiting beyond Edinburgh. The same holds true for fools, and for dwarfs: the king does not appear to have supported any such entertainers himself, but would on occasion tip those he encountered elsewhere.

Combat sports present another familiar para-theatrical activity enjoyed by the court at this period. As with many courtly performance activities, there seems to be a fluid line between spectatorship and participation, the elite community of the court often moving seamlessly between the two. While there is little evidence in this set of records that James, like his predecessors, financed tournaments and other spectacular battle games himself, we know from other sources that he attended and participated in such events. On the occasion of the Earl of Murray's marriage early in 1580, for which his masking clothes were prepared, he watched an elaborate water battle set up as an assault on 'the Popes pallas', and himself took part in running at the ring.¹⁵ Less elaborate versions of such games continue throughout the period. The accounts show various payments for installing and maintaining lists at Holyrood and elsewhere, and providing James with spears for running at the ring, payments which continue even in the apparently more sober regime after his escape from the Ruthven Raiders and the death of Esmé Stewart. This is an activity that clearly covers a spectrum, from personal physical skill and sport at one end to full blown mimetic performance at the other, confirming the difficulty of separating the theatrical from the general public display of court life.

The theatrical, para-theatrical, and musical events promoted in James's early court are all revealed in the records as part of a wider culture of courtly play, pastime and display. James was renowned in his own time and since for his interest in literature, in books, scholarship and composition. At this stage of his life he was especially a poet and critic, who engaged with a coterie of other court writers: the accounts record notable payments to printers, authors, bookbinders and writers, including for publication of James's own first works in poetry and criticism.¹⁶ We find entries for indoor games – billiards, chess and cards – as well as for outdoor sports such as golf, and maintenance and equipment for catchpell not only in James's own courts but '*quhairuir his hienes sall repair throchout ye haill realme*'.¹⁷ Exotic animals, including a lioness, are kept along with '*vther his hienes pettis*'. James's addiction to hunting – well attested throughout his life – already shows in the accounts in increasingly regular and extensive expenses on horses, hounds and hawks. Relatively few of these entries are included here, since many clearly fall outside even extended categories of the dramatic. But the non-committal format of the records suggests that all, along with more obviously dramatic games, fell into the

category of 'pastyme', and many share the elaborate and luxurious decoration which contributes to the self-conscious performance of courtly life. Along with James's own rich clothing, which bulks very large in the accounts, and the red and yellow livery clothes provided for resident musicians and pages of honour, the material texture of courtly life was designed for display, asserting and even performing its own status, civilisation and power. Scotland was not a wealthy country and the accounts at times reveal the court's straitened circumstances; but while the theatrical culture of James's early court was clearly constrained in comparison with that of England or France, the continuing expenditure on all versions of material display confirms its awareness of the power of such daily performance.

The overlap between theatricality and the workings of power can perhaps be seen most directly in the expenses on ceremonial and proclamation. Along with the violars, the royal household maintained a permanent group of trumpeters who accompanied, marked and enforced a wide range of significant public ceremonies. Trumpeters are involved in the preparations for the Parliament of October 1581, and are newly dressed either for that event or for the magnificent installation of Esmé Stewart as Duke of Lennox that immediately preceded it. Expenses on the decoration of James's own ornate harnessing and caparison similarly bear witness to the ceremony of the riding to Parliament.¹⁸ Trumpeters are explicitly recorded as assigned to particularly important proclamations and charges, the element of public performance extending the authority of the court out into the community. The transfer of the last Regent, the Earl of Morton, to Dumbarton after his fall in December 1580 was accompanied by a trumpeter, as was the herald sent to demand the yielding up of the castle of Tantallon from the Earl of Angus in summer 1581; James's formal revocation of acts passed in his minority, and the death of Esmé Stewart were both proclaimed with trumpets. In fact the records suggest that James increasingly used the proclamation as a means of managing his relationship with his subjects, especially in his heightened anxieties following the Ruthven Raid. Proclamations announced the restriction of access to the king, the control of political allegiances, and especially the suppression of the publication of libels and cartels, themselves understandable as forms of anonymous public performance.¹⁹ Such use of proclamations attests to a degree of conscious ceremonial performance in the exercise of rule and in political controversy, perhaps partly linked to James's ingrained personal nervousness as a prince 'nourished in fear'.²⁰

Taken together these records attest to an active culture of courtly play at the early court of James VI. It is revealing, though, that the focus on music and drama appears less fully developed than in previous reigns. In part this is likely to be a natural result of James's youth as an actively reigning monarch, following the preceding twelve years of regency in which the court had little role to play as an embodiment of magnificence and power, while his strict scholarly and Protestant upbringing at Stirling had given him little experience of dramatic activity before his arrival in Edinburgh. The relatively impoverished state of the crown in these years also restricted the possibility of lavish display. Nonetheless, expense on theatricality and display does show from the beginning an awareness of the possible

roles of performance at court, both as an assertion of royal status and power and for subtler engagement with events, people and politics. James may not have been much drawn to personal performance, as had been his mother, father and grandfather. While his impressionable responsiveness to Esmé Stewart is probably reflected in his early participation in masking, his own creative impulses at this period were more thoroughly and positively directed into the writing of poetry, a shared courtly activity in which he took the lead and which led to the publication of his impressive collection *Essayes of a Prentise in the Divine Arte of Poesie* in 1584. But while James may not have taken personal pleasure in performing, the records reveal how subtly dramatic activity, and its absence, might be used at court: to establish and promote the identity of the monarch, to create and demonstrate political allegiance, and as an instrument of rule itself.

Currency note: during the period covered by these accounts the Scots pound was equivalent to about four English pounds

Translation note: those unfamiliar with early Scots may find the online *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* a useful resource: <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>

For further reading:

Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, ed. Thomas Dickson et al, 12 vols (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1877)

Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots 1547-1603, ed. J Bain et al, 13 vols (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1898-1969)

Michael Lynch, 'Court Ceremony and Ritual During the Personal Reign of James VI', in *The Reign of James VI*, ed. Julian Goodare and Michael Lynch (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 71-92.

Anna J Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwoods, 1927)

Helena M. Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969)

¹ Evidence from earlier is too sparse to build a detailed picture, and after 1603 when James VI left to take up the throne of England, Scotland's Royal Court was no longer centred on a resident monarch.

² Of monarchs reigning between 1400 and 1600, only Robert III and James IV had succeeded to the throne as adults (and James IV was only 15 years old). In addition, James I and Mary Stuart each spent extended periods of their minorities and adult rule abroad, James in England and Mary in France.

³ For analysis of this in one particular reign see Sarah Carpenter, 'Performing Diplomacies: The 1560s Court Entertainments of Mary Queen of Scots', *Scottish Historical Review*, LXXXII (2003), 194-225.

⁴ See, in particular, the *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots 1547-1603*, ed. J Bain et al, 13 vols (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1898-1969). Hereafter *CSPS*.

⁵ *A diurnal of remarkable occurrents that have passed within the country of Scotland, since the death of King James the Fourth till the year M.DLXXV*, ed. Thomas Thomson, *Bannatyne Club Publications*, 43 (Edinburgh:

Bannatyne Club, 1833). For an overview of Scottish historiography of the period see Nicola Royan and Dauvit Broun, 'Versions of Scottish Nationhood c. 850-1707' in Thomas Owen Clancy and Murray Pittock, eds., *From Columba to the Union (until 1707)* Vol. 1, *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Ian Brown and Susan Manning, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 168-83.

⁶ Anna J Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwoods, 1927).

⁷ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, ed. Thomas Dickson et al, 13 vols (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1877-1978). Hereafter TA.

⁸ For James's life during the years covered here see Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King: a Life of James VI and I* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), chs 3-5.

⁹ Although James (along with Esmé Stewart and the ex-Regent Morton) did attend the performance of a play laid on for them in St Andrews during James's first progress in Spring 1580. See Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, 288; John J. McGavin, *Theatricality and Narrative in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 85-108.

¹⁰ For the entry see Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, 192-4; Michael Lynch. 'Court Ceremony and Ritual during the Personal Reign of James VI', in *The Reign of James VI*, ed. Julian Goodare and Michael Lynch (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 71-92.

¹¹ Texts published in *Alexander Montgomerie: Poems*, ed. David J Parkinson (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 2000), 90-98

¹² See R. J. Lyall, *Alexander Montgomerie: Poetry, Politics, and Cultural Change in Jacobean Scotland* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 63-75.

¹³ For information on the Hudson family see Helena M. Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 71-5.

¹⁴ *CSPS* 7, 274.

¹⁵ *CSPS* 5, 611.

¹⁶ 'Item be his hienes precept to Woutroullier prentare for ye prenting of his maiesties buik', October 1584 (E22/6, fol 211^v). This is for James's first published work, *Essayes of a Prentise, in the Diuine Art of Poesie*.

¹⁷ The royal tennis court at Falkland Palace, several times recorded in these accounts, is still in existence.

¹⁸ For parliamentary ceremonial see Thomas Innes of Learney, 'The Scottish Parliament: its Symbolism and its Ceremonial', *Juridical Review* 44 (1932), 87—24; for the relationship between parliamentary ceremonial and theatre see Sarah Carpenter, 'Plays and Playcoats: a Courtly Interlude Tradition in Scotland?', *Comparative Drama* 46.4, 475-96 (at 486-7).

¹⁹ For some discussion of libels and performance, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch 6 'Ballads and Libels'.

²⁰ *CSPS* 7, 274.